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Global Feminisms, c. 1870–1930: vocabularies and concepts - a comparative approach.

VIEWPOINT

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Abstract

This 'viewpoint' assesses some recent approaches to the study of feminisms across the globe during the c. 1870–1930 period. At a moment when historians are working towards the commemoration of women's partial enfranchisement in Britain in 1918, we consider the intellectual frameworks that most effectively celebrate this achievement whilst also situating the Act within its complex, global context. Reflecting on discussions held at a recent workshop at the University of Oxford, we advocate the effectiveness of a global and comparative methodological approach to question what 'feminism' meant to contemporary campaigners. The scrutiny of localised and national issues within comparative and global contexts illuminates the plurality of definitions, vocabularies, and categories relating to feminism that were being used (and rejected) during this era and raises broader questions for the study and practice of feminist history.

Key words: global feminism, comparative history, women's suffrage, women's rights, female empowerment.

In this ‘viewpoint’ we reflect on a symposium organised by the authors with Marilyn Booth at the University of Oxford in January 2017 on ‘Global and comparative feminisms in the long nineteenth century: new perspectives’.¹ Our event was organised to consider how best to categorise the projects of female empowerment that began to crystallise and cluster across the globe during the *c.* 1870–1930 period. The day was structured around comparative discussions of current work in progress. This workshop took place during the week of President Donald Trump’s inauguration and the mass mobilisation of women in the ensuing ‘pussy hat’ rallies. Whilst attendees at the workshop differed greatly in their views as to the global appropriateness of the term ‘feminist’, there was a passionate collective voice as to the critical importance of ongoing debates into the relationship between politics, women’s issues, feminism, and ‘the global’.

At a time when many women’s and gender historians are involved in an array of public and scholarly projects to commemorate the centenary of partial enfranchisement for British women in 1918, this viewpoint article considers some of the varying manifestations of female agency and empowerment from the late nineteenth century through to the early twentieth century.² In so doing, it suggests further, less British-centric narratives within which the Act might be situated. In the pages which follow, we will commence with a discussion of existing literature on global feminism in the *c.* 1870–1930 period, offering an appraisal of some of the key analytical frameworks, vocabularies, and approaches which have shaped the field. This will be followed by a consideration of the papers delivered at the symposium and the discussions they prompted. Our hope is that this will contribute to further contemplation of some of the perspectives to be emerging from the latest research.

In recent years, Western feminist scholarship has become increasingly attentive to the global networks and transnational links which motivated many first-wave feminists across this era.³ Exciting collaborative projects, examining for example the difficulties posed by translation in the study of historic feminist ideologies, are also substantially enriching understanding.⁴ Reintegrating British suffrage history into a global framework has brought a keener sense of the diverse conversations with which British campaigners were engaged by the early twentieth century.⁵ When British suffragettes broke shop panes in Bond Street, London in March 1912, Chinese campaigners lauded their actions and carried out a similar attack on the windows of the Nanjing Parliament.⁶ Members of the Women's Freedom League articulated a language of global sisterhood which was more sensitive than some organisations as to the varying experiences of women under patriarchy; and the feminist press in Britain reported on contemporary movements for female emancipation across the globe including Iran and Asia.⁷ British suffrage militancy was also closely influenced by unfolding events in South Africa and by the consequent war in 1899–1902.⁸

Attempts to define 'feminism' through a comparative historical lens have proven controversial, however. In an exchange in 1988–9, Nancy F. Cott criticised Karen Offen for her desire to embrace 'relational' as well as 'individualistic' feminisms of the past. 'Rather than connecting large areas of women's thought adjectivally under the rubric of feminism', complained Cott, 'we ought to multiply our vocabulary'.⁹ Many scholars have attempted to do just that. Fleischmann has argued that in the Middle East one of the most common terminologies used was that of 'awakening',¹⁰ whilst the editors of one collection of nineteenth-century European women's movements have argued for the appropriateness of 'women's emancipation' as a preferable organising category to that of 'feminism'.¹¹ Historians of the fin-de-siècle Middle East have often chosen the phrase the 'Woman

Question’ to capture the constellation of reformist discourses on women’s position, linked in complex ways to nationalist debates and renewed discussions about the family in the light of a newly emerging middle class.¹² More recently Zillah Eisenstein has made the case for ‘polyversal feminisms’—an intellectual position which eschews universalist frameworks of female emancipation in favour of a radical pluralism which recognises the multiple strategies of female resistance whilst recognising points of connection.¹³ By adopting Eisenstein’s approach of polyversality and seeking to plot how diverse projects of female empowerment came into being, a tightly-focused comparative methodology has the potential to illuminate how women can cultivate creative subjective spaces and modes of agency or dissent and how they variously classified such activity. This is a strategy which prioritises sensitivity to locally-specific contexts and discourses, whilst also recognising, as Marilyn Booth has put it, the ‘transregional and translation circulation of ideas and practices that marked intellectual and political life for elites in many parts of the globe at the turn of the twentieth century.’¹⁴

It was in the 1890s that numerous neologisms expressing departures in female aspirations began to appear. The term *féminisme* started to become familiar to wider audiences, having appeared as part of a ‘feminist’ conference in Paris in 1892.¹⁵ It was a term which was soon to have global reach. By 1905 an ‘Asociacion Feminista Filipino’ had been established in the Philippines, for example.¹⁶ Other terms were emerging too, including ‘the new woman’ in Europe, Egypt, Japan, China, and Korea; ‘suffragette’ in Britain; *nan-nü* (male-female) in China;¹⁷ and *fusen* (women’s suffrage) as articulated by Japanese campaigners in 1925.¹⁸ Padma Anagol has pointed to the linguistic sophistication of late nineteenth-century Marathi-speaking Indian women who deployed such terms as ‘bhaginivarg’ (sisterhood) and ‘strianubhab’ (women’s experience) in articulating a feminist politics within the colonial context.¹⁹ Through employing an ambitious geographical range that encompassed scholars

working on the Middle East, India, the Caribbean, the United States, the United Kingdom, and Africa, the workshop held in Oxford in 2017 sought to consider how resonant some of these new terms were for activists and how they themselves wished to self-identify.

From its inception there is evidence of widespread hostility to the term ‘feminism’ on the part of female campaigners and writers from Russia to North Africa to India.²⁰ Frequently criticised as an uncritical production of Western ideals or practices, feminism has often been seen as—and indeed has functioned as—a mode of cultural imperialism in itself.²¹ The three stage model for identifying when and where European women’s movements have flourished, as plotted by Paletschek and Pietrow-Ennker, focused upon Enlightenment philosophies; wider political calls for representation and civil rights; and the impact of industrialisation as necessary or probable conditions.²² This is analytically reasonable for Western Europe, but underlines the specificity of Western-focussed categorisations of feminism. Some scholars have argued for the utility of the term nonetheless, maintaining that a broad definition of ‘feminist’ need not equate to Western uses of the term.²³ As scholars have long recognised, modes of inquiry are also needed which capture women’s practices of resistance in other contexts and which are less teleological in approach or necessarily linked to narratives of modernity.²⁴ Moreover, many of the defining features of Euro-American women’s rights movements—such as campaigns for improved property laws or political rights—were irrelevant in matrilineal societies such as the Asante in Ghana, or the Seneca tribe in North America, where property was passed down the female line and the authority of leaders depended on lineage or categories of age rather than gender.²⁵ Many African scholars, following novelist Alice Walker’s formulation of the term, have argued for ‘womanism’ as an alternative to feminism. Its vernacular sensitivity, emphasis on praxis, and recognition of the diverse oppressions facing women have given the concept wide purchase.²⁶

One criterion for exploring shifts in female empowerment is the extent to which women were able to marshal opportunities for self-expression. The nineteenth century witnessed many new forms of cultural creativity in this regard. A widespread pattern from the mid nineteenth century was the growing role of print culture in providing a space for forms of female dissent against (or sometimes within) patriarchal norms—at least for women of the elites. In China for example women began to exploit the popularity of biographies of ‘exemplary women’ and *bieji* (personal anthologies) to voice frustration with normative kinship roles and patriarchal male behaviour.²⁷ Such endeavours formed part of a broader ‘alternate analytics of reform’, as Joan Judge puts it, alongside other extra-textual practices, such as the use of visual portraits, to establish women’s presence in public debate.²⁸ Women’s appropriation of genres such as biography was a strategy used in many other contexts. In Egypt, for example, an ambitious collective biography published in 1891 by Zaynab Fawwaz (c. 1850–1914) drew upon women’s lives across the globe to help ‘initiate a feminism that was local in its grounding and sensibility, cosmopolitan in its comparative rhetoric and transnational awareness’.²⁹ Meanwhile the growing function of the press in enabling fresh perspectives on women’s experiences to be articulated and shared was becoming widespread. Scholars have noted, for example, the significance of a women’s press in facilitating reformist debate in colonial India, Egypt, Turkey, Iran, Syria, Greece, Korea, and China.³⁰ Nonetheless, emphasis on the printed word obscures other sites of female creative expression.³¹ In Burundi and Buha, it has been argued that ‘peripheral cults’ such as the *kubandwa* formed a ‘feminist subculture’ in which women gained authority to protest against male dominance.³²

Religion was a key facet of many other examples of shifting female empowerment. Joanna de Groot has discerned the significance of millenarian religion for the social and cultural

enfranchisement of women in nineteenth-century Iran, demonstrating how the high profile career of Qurrat al-Ayn (1814–1852), leader of the Babi religious movement, ‘shows that Iranian women could forge their own paths, become cultural leaders and challenged gender norms, which might align with “feminism”, but were embedded in contexts where explicitly feminist politics was not the central issue’.³³ As this suggests, despite some far-reaching commonalities of intellectual influence (J. S. Mill’s 1869 *Subjection of Women* reached enthusiastic audiences across Europe, including in Finland and Russia, and also in Japan, the British colonies, China, and the USA), ‘rights’ were not necessarily the foundational framework for those seeking to enhance the status of women.³⁴ Even amongst those actively campaigning for ‘women’s rights’, global specificities of language and context mean that the notion of ‘rights’ could have multiple inflexions. In Japan it included a Confucian sense of the importance of education in the development of individual ethical sensibilities. Here, the early twentieth-century campaigner Hiratsuka Raicho (1886–1971) advocated *koken* (women’s rights) and *boken* (mothers’ rights) but neither connoted voting rights.³⁵

Just as we need to be attentive to the multiplicity of strategies, aims, idioms, and projects to change women’s position within a wider global context, so too is it important to remember the diversity of circumstances in which reforms were enacted. Liberal achievements affecting women’s status were widely enacted by states for their own ulterior aims, and rarely dovetailed neatly into a feminist-shaped space created by female activism. In Iran and Turkey changes to women’s position, including education and the liberalisation of dress codes, comprised part of the agendas of male politicians seeking to establish their credentials as secularist modernisers. Although settler-colony states tended to enfranchise women before those of the metropolis, the decision to enfranchise or partially enfranchise women was often part of a calculated move to uphold male and / or ethnic majorities.³⁶ As Patricia Grimshaw

explains, ‘In New Zealand settler fears of men of color had led to the incorporation of Maori men into the mainstream political system ... Settler fears of men of colour in Australia, however, led to their exclusion from mainstream politics’. Under the Maori Representation Act of 1867, (male) Maori landholders were granted a dual vote—one for the general electorate and another for one of four separate seats for which only Maori could stand. In 1893, Maori women (and white women) were enfranchised, but the Maori community lost their double vote, with voters permitted to choose only one representative. Hence, the 1893 act formed part of a wider strategy of handling race relations. In contrast, in Australia, the Commonwealth Franchise Act of 1902 gave the vote to all white Australians in national elections (white women in South Australia and Western Australia having been enfranchised in 1894 and 1899 respectively) but it excluded both aboriginal men and women.³⁷

Sometimes women’s votes were conceded due to an essentialist assumption that they were likely to assist in the maintenance of a conservative status quo, as in Ecuador in 1929, or the state of Utah in 1870.³⁸ Similar arguments that women’s votes would help to form a bulwark against Bolshevik revolution helped to secure female suffrage in Sweden—and women were denied the vote for the same reason in post-revolution Mexico.³⁹ Placed in this global context, the UK government’s decision to enfranchise only those women over thirty who fulfilled the criteria of local voters is more clearly identified as part of a broader pattern of strategic calculation. As well as acknowledging the achievements of the Representation of the People Act (1918) for British women and the inspiring campaigners who secured it, it is clearly the case that the limitations and multiple ambivalences of the Act itself should be recognised.

The complexity of political, social, and racial considerations underlying female enfranchisement in specific contexts are a powerful reminder of the hugely diverse constraints within which female activists were operating. There are some striking patterns of commonality—not least the close association in the early twentieth century between nationalism and renewed claims for female rights in many countries, including Ireland, Finland, Turkey, and Iran.⁴⁰ But of course, within nationalist movements, female adherents often prioritised, or were expected to prioritise, nationhood over the achievement of female rights. In any case, within any one country or region, the significance of the vote as a symbol of female emancipation varied significantly. Whilst British public history and social memory have tended to privilege the vote as a critical test of women's status, there was a multitude of debates and perspectives as to its salience in the period in question.

Putting female enfranchisement in a global context reminds us that 1918 was not simply a result of the march of democratic ideals and committed activism, but one stage in a far more complicated and chequered history of women's rights. In Sierra Leone, a land which had been granted to the British by a treaty signed by Queen Yamacouba (dates unknown) in 1787, female householders were entitled to vote in elections in 1792. That it was therefore women of colour who first exercised the right to vote is rarely acknowledged in histories of suffrage, nor that it was taken from them when Sierra Leone became a British crown colony in 1808.⁴¹ Such complicated colonial histories were replicated elsewhere during the nineteenth century. In those parts of Mexico which were subsumed into North America, married women lost their rights under Spanish law to property and equal custody of their children.⁴² Similarly in Hawaii, elite women's rights to elect representatives to their upper house were eroded.⁴³

Such fractured and disparate histories, and the challenges they present to scholars, were central themes of the 2017 Oxford symposium on global and comparative feminisms, under consideration here. The first panel consisted of two papers, beginning with Imaobong Umoren's contribution entitled 'Daughters of Africa: black feminism and Pan-Africanism in the Caribbean and US', and followed by Marilyn Booth, speaking on 'Ancient Greeks and Modern Gladstones: "Europe", histories of patriarchy, and feminist recognitions in 1890s Egypt'.⁴⁴ Umoren traced the emergence of nineteenth-century speeches and writings penned by black women's rights campaigners in the United States: Maria Stewart (1803–1879), Sojourner Truth (1797–1883), Anna Julia Cooper (1858–1964); and the Jamaican, Catherine McKenzie (?–1903). Such individuals were acutely aware of the changing context in which they lived—a usual prerequisite for the emergence of feminist ideas according to Offen.⁴⁵ The speeches and writings which underpinned Umoren's discussion suggest the term 'feminism' was little used in these networks. An urgent and explicit focus on the need for equal political rights for all was, however, much-argued. Umoren reminded the audience that black feminism had significant global and comparative dimensions from its earliest days because it was shaped by the African diasporic experience of slavery, violence, and racism. Moreover, black feminists were operating in a context in which many white female campaigners were hostile to the enfranchisement of black men before the vote had been achieved for white women. Campaigners considered by Umoren were directly involved in Pan Africanism: Cooper was to address the first Pan-African conference in London in 1900, and Catherine McKenzie was secretary of the Pan-African Association of Kingston in Jamaica. However, Umoren also follows scholars of black female nationalism such as Kathy Glass, in observing the extent to which earlier activists also articulated a feminism in relation to the African diaspora.⁴⁶ As Maria Stewart declared in 1891, 'ye daughters of Africa, awake!'⁴⁷

In contrast to Umoren's emphasis on the lived experiences of black women in the Caribbean and the United States, Marilyn Booth used published French and Arabic works to explore the emergence of intellectual discussions about feminism in fin-de-siècle Egypt. Booth explained that debates about the 'status of women' had been circulating, as in Europe and North America, since the 1850s. But as Booth cautioned, although the colonial situation shaped local debates it did so in complex ways, leading her to urge for the need 'to think more about the contemporary-ness of these discourses in many places, and what similarities, translations, and incommensurabilities they reveal.'

Booth began by focusing on a series of lectures on 'Women across historical periods' given by a French lycée teacher, Adolphine Couvreur (dates unknown), at the new Egyptian University in Cairo in 1909–10, after local women requested lectures at what was turning out to be an all-male institution, though a few women did attend 'regular' classes. These lectures may be the first occasion in which the term 'feminism' was used in the Egyptian context, in French. At least in the lectures (which were published a few months later), Couvreur seemed unaware of longstanding and vigorous intellectual debates amongst women in Egypt concerning women's rights, gendered roles, and social spaces—a pertinent reminder of the disconnect that could take place even at localised levels between differently placed individuals. To illustrate this, Booth drew on a series of debates initiated by Arabophone women in the 1890s Arabic press in Cairo and Beirut, focussing on an 1892 exchange between two women of Lebanese descent, Hanna Kurani (1870–98) and Zaynab Fawwaz (c. 1850–1914). An initial focus of the controversy was their differing views of the British women's suffrage movement and the role played by British Prime Minister William Gladstone (1809–1898) in blocking a recent bill. Fawwaz derided Kurani's sympathy with

the British anti-suffragists, rooting her observations with reference to the experience of Egyptian female workers who, she insisted, demonstrated the equality of the sexes, and rejected essentialist notions of gendered work sanctified by religious custom. In response Kurani mocked Fawwaz for what she intimated was Fawwaz's mimicry of Western ideals, which she referred to as the 'incurable illness' of 'We easterners'. As Booth observes, these discussions demonstrated how imperial metropole politics could be co-opted by Egyptian women as a platform for debating local gendered concerns. These discussions reveal the highly visible presence that European politics and 'Western feminism' held within nineteenth-century Egyptian society. However, as Booth has argued elsewhere, such influences were not 'unidirectional' but rather should be seen as part of the 'globalizing forces that surfaced in locally produced, outward-reaching discourses'.⁴⁸

The imagined Europe evoked by Kurani and others was a contentious signifier of modernity and material desirability, but also stoked fears of moral degeneration and sexual transgression. Nonetheless, Booth indicated that Western feminism was not positioned simply as a 'straw figure' to be pulled down. Rather, it became entrenched within the local context, shaped by the experiences of the Egyptian intelligentsia who sought to unpick its meanings and ascribe new perspectives. The intricacies of feminist etymologies constitute a persuasive theme in Booth's work. She has previously urged scholars 'to "think in translation", to ponder the genesis of feminist terminologies across divergent linguistic regions'.⁴⁹ There was no direct translation of 'feminism' in contemporary Arabic, and the term 'rights' has similar complexities. In Egypt, 'rights' had historically referred specifically to rights within the Islamic legal system connoting 'what is due to one', including the appropriate treatment of women in marriage.

The respondent to this panel was Jaclyn Granick. Granick is working on a new project concerning Jewish women's internationalism during the twentieth century and has been considering the meaning of terms such as 'emancipation' and 'rights' for Jews in the modern era in her own work. In this context Granick explained that she is finding that when adding a gendered lens, the more expansive concept of 'emancipation' tended to have greater salience than 'rights', and was perceived as having higher potential to enhance Jewish women's position within their own communities. Granick wondered why, given the history of slavery in America, emancipation may not have featured in the specific texts presented by Umoren, while 'rights' was a key term for black feminists, especially in post 1865 America. In contrast to the women studied by Granick and Umoren, emancipation in the Egyptian context was used much less commonly and had a far more complex set of resonances. (It was associated not only with liberation from slavery, but also had connotations of respectability). Whilst Granick suggested that patriarchal constructs appeared to play a role in shaping the female subjectivities under discussion, the opportunities provided by religion, education, and modernity across these contexts appear to have furnished tools for women to contest and re-imagine ingrained social positions. Both papers revealed there were, unsurprisingly, competing voices about the most appropriate ways to articulate support for an expanded role for women in public life. Still, in North America and the Caribbean there appears to have been a more unified sense of a black women's rights movement with an emphasis on the centrality of women's experiences to the wider diasporic community. Women in Cairo, albeit circulating within a wider Ottoman Empire, were more interested in the local, typically seeking to define themselves in marked contrast from European feminisms. Furthermore, Egyptian and Syrian-Ottoman writers, unlike those in the Caribbean and the United States, tended to 'deflect' their experiences by referring to examples of unnamed, anonymous women, rather than using their own life stories to advocate for societal change.

In the second panel on 'India and USA/UK' the two speakers focused on projects relating to their forthcoming books. Sumita Mukherjee spoke on, 'Indian Women, Suffrage, and Changing Definitions of International Feminism', whilst Ruth Percy delivered a paper on, 'Class and Feminism at the Turn of the Century: Britain and America'.⁵⁰ Mukherjee is building on the work of Antoinette Burton to scrutinise the ways female Indian campaigners engaged with the suffrage question, with an emphasis on their international networks. The women she researches, who were overwhelmingly middle-class and well-educated, considered achieving suffrage to be a symbol of modernity, according to Mukherjee. Terminology was key to Mukherjee's discussions. In common with historians such as Anagol and Borghi,⁵¹ she insists on the appropriateness of employing the label 'feminist', and extends this to include 'suffragette', demonstrating the radicalism of her subjects, both rhetorically and practically, in their demands for the vote and equal representation.

Nonetheless, these were women who themselves rejected both these labels. Geraldine Forbes has observed that Indian women in the colonial period did not call themselves feminist because it implied priority to women's rights issues when they also faced the pressing struggle for national equality.⁵² Mukherjee concurs, adding that as a result criticisms of Indian men remained mild (even non-existent). As with the French lecturer considered by Marilyn Booth, 'feminism' had pejorative undertones here, being associated with an aggressive dislike of men. To emphasise her point, Mukherjee considered an interview with poet and politician Sarojini Naidu (1879–1949) in the *Daily News and Leader* in 1913. Naidu was reported as claiming that 'the vote' meant nothing to her, and was 'an empty word suggesting a foreign ideal'.⁵³ However, it is equally the case that Western advocates for reform to women's position frequently rejected the 'feminist' label also and could be

ambivalent on the suffrage question. As Lucy Delap has established, many self-styled British and American ‘suffragists’ who campaigned for women’s votes deliberately rejected the category ‘feminist’. Conversely, numerous advanced activists in turn of the century USA and UK embraced the term ‘feminist’ but wished to self-identify as progressive thinkers who transcended liberal individualism and the suffrage question to forge new, capacious forms of female self-expression.⁵⁴

So too in Mukherjee’s study, but for divergent reasons, suffrage was only ever a part of a wider fight for changes being advocated for women in Indian society. With clear resonance to Umoren’s paper, there was a complex interrelation between the demand for expanded rights for women and nationalist, imperialist struggles. Woven throughout this was the significant role played by religion. Both the nationalist movement and the Hindu women involved in suffrage used Hindu mythologies and models of female leaders to attest to the historic equality between men and women during ‘the golden age of India’, before the relentless waves of colonialism. Scholars have discerned comparable processes in Turkey, Iran, Japan, and Egypt, with similar claims that women had enjoyed elevated positions in these countries’ earliest histories.⁵⁵ What Mukherjee referred to as ‘self-orientalising language’ (a term which prompted debate amongst participants) was often used by such women. She outlined how they homogenised an ‘Asian experience’ in their desire to speak for Asian women, and celebrated prevalent stereotypes about their supposed spirituality, femininity, and domestic prowess, whilst insisting these qualities could work in tandem with new ideas of citizenship.

In her book project, Mukherjee is assessing the wider transnational networks Indian women forged across the empire. Geographer David Featherstone, in his work on the Atlantic world, has discussed the plural forms of subaltern cosmopolitans.⁵⁶ This provides a

productive framework for Mukherjee's detailed exploration of the multiple identities of Indian activists across diverse contexts. She is finding that their agendas and vocabularies shifted in response to an emergent cosmopolitanism developed through travel and migration—a process which in itself helped to crystallise their own sense of 'India' and their position as subjects within it. Interactions within different geographical landscapes, and various 'types' of feminists, deeply influenced how Indian women thought about suffrage and citizenship. Indian women took part in a coronation procession march with British suffragettes organised in London on 17 June 1911, but their positioning was complex given that they could not represent an independent nation.⁵⁷ Mukherjee's discussion of a text authored by Shareefah Hamid Ali (1883–1971) for the Alliance of Women Congress in Istanbul in 1935, 'East and West in Co-operation', exemplifies how Indian campaigners sought to project their experiences onto the global stage, and to forge relationships with women from the Middle East, Britain, America, Japan, mainland Europe, and Australia. In an exploration of what she is framing as 'colonial feminism', Mukherjee's work in progress considers how Indian women participated in networks of colonial female activism beyond the metropole, but often did so within a racialised hierarchy in which the claims of women of African descent were ignored.⁵⁸

Ruth Percy's paper also addressed the rejection of the term 'feminist' in her talk on women's trade unionism in late nineteenth-century Britain and North America, focusing especially on the Working Women's Union in Chicago (from c. 1880) and the Women's Protective and Providence League in London (founded in 1874). This included trade unionist Mary Macarthur (1880–1921) who famously asserted 'I am not a feminist'.⁵⁹ These women tended to hold similar views to German socialist Clara Zetkin (1857–1933), who declared herself to be the adversary of 'bourgeois feminism'.⁶⁰ The subjects of Percy's study put class solidarity

and collectivism first in a politics which was sceptical of liberal emphases upon individual rights. It was a distinction often lost on contemporaries, and Macarthur was even referred to as ‘the well-known feminist leader’ in one newspaper in 1916.⁶¹ Drawing from contemporary printed publications but also from more recent oral histories, Percy traced how tensions were exacerbated because educated, middle- and upper-class white women routinely developed feminist ideologies in spaces from which working-class women were excluded. Echoing Mukherjee’s paper, the women in this context also perceived feminism negatively, enmeshed with views of radical suffragettes and ‘sex war’. Nonetheless, Percy’s subjects felt the need to develop their own networks to protect and promote women’s interests in a movement which often treated their experiences as secondary. As such, reformers and politicised women workers began to share ideas and strategies across the Atlantic. By the 1910s and 1920s there is some evidence of the term feminism being specifically discussed in Labour women’s writings, but even as it became more commonly used, activists generally viewed the term negatively due to their wish to dissociate themselves from what they perceived to be a middle-class women’s movement.⁶²

A key difficulty in trying to excavate how terms such as ‘feminism’ were (or were not) being used by these women is the lack of documentation pertaining to rank and file members. In the 1970s and 1980s a series of oral interviews conducted by second-wave feminists sought to ask women of preceding generations whether they had been feminists.⁶³ This prompted debate at the workshop as to the difficulties in assessing the historic specificity of the term within this methodology. Still, Percy has sympathy with the political drive to position these women as feminists by later generations. Many discussants agreed: goals of gender equality underpinned their activism; they were powerful advocates for women’s experiences as wage earners; and they also addressed women’s unpaid labour as wives and mothers in the home.

June Hannam and Karen Hunt in their own study of socialist women from this period preferred the term ‘woman-focused’ to ‘feminist’ in describing the female politics of these networks.⁶⁴ Further discussion about the comparative resonance with ‘womanism’ would be apposite for future exploration. In the Egyptian context discussed by Booth a contemporary term, *nisa'i*, meaning ‘to do with women’, perhaps did similar work.

The workshop ended with a roundtable discussion featuring contributions from Erica Charters and Antoinette Burton. Within this final session, participants continued to debate themes relating to the difficulties posed by translation and the very use of the term ‘feminism’; the need to break down and question historical categories such as ‘Europe’ and ‘modern’; the problems of conceptualising various understandings of ‘the global’; and the importance of avoiding the projection of a global homogeneity onto the past. Charters commented on the shifting context of the term ‘modernity’ throughout the papers. Burton questioned the spatial imaginaries of the global and the definitions and scale that had been selected by speakers. She also suggested recognising the proportionality of feminism within wider histories of women and the relationship between feminism and other forms of solidarity. As Burton reminded us, ‘we must interrogate the affective connections we have to our histories which blind us to other insights.’

The papers had drawn attention to a variety of semantic and political motivations historical subjects had for refusing the term ‘feminist’. African specialist Kerrie Thornhill questioned whether ‘rejection’ is the appropriate term to deploy in the case of colonised subjects, given the epistemic violence enacted in imperial contexts. Burton observed that in her view, the term ‘feminist’ had, over the course of the day, often been portrayed as something that historic individuals would have identified with or rejected, rather than a continually shifting

set of ideologies and beliefs. She also suggested that Joan Scott conceptualised gender differently to the ways in which many speakers had done so during the workshop—Scott perceiving gender as ‘a force field, a vibrant matter’, as Burton put it, rather than a distinct identity marker.⁶⁵ Lucy Delap also queried an approach that led to a focus on conceptualising the ways in which feminists had been divided by identity, suggesting that spatiality may offer fertile new ways to research feminist stories. Mukherjee’s examination of the shifting rhetoric and agendas her subjects articulated in different global spaces provides one productive possibility in this respect.

As co-organisers of the workshop we welcomed these debates and the richness of views articulated. On balance, both authors of this article were left feeling wary of applying categorisations to historical subjects who explicitly declined such a label, though we recognise the intellectual arguments for so doing—including its convenience as historical shorthand.⁶⁶ Some participants argued for a political imperative to position historic figures within a framework (i.e. feminism) that would make them accessible and legible to a wider public audience today. Eisenstein’s desire for a flexible model of ‘polyversal feminisms’ which can encompass the manifold modes through which women seek empowerment in heterogeneous contexts is an important intellectual move, and one which is informing some of the most exciting work in this field.⁶⁷ But we also question if a proliferation of ‘feminisms’ is best suited to the task. Whilst excavating the intellectual history of women-centred ideologies is a critical project, there might also be a case for privileging praxis rather than theory as the initial unit of analysis to better enable comparative women’s history.

Foregrounding the disparate female empowerment strategies women deploy, be they practical or discursive, could function as a productive tool in this respect. For, as we have seen, the

‘feminisms’ scholars have identified for the 1870–1930 period are extraordinarily diverse. They include instances of collective action, such as the female trade unions considered by Percy, to more diverse forms of cultural work, for example, Indian women’s appropriation of Hindu mythologies. There are examples of inclusive, transnational female projects, but many were exclusionary in terms of class, race, or nationality. Some women, moreover, practised modes of empowerment which eschewed the collective in favour of more individualistic projects of deliberation, such as Couvreur’s re-writing of historical narratives in Booth’s study.

The concept of women’s empowerment strategies was initially delineated in the 1980s by female activists in the southern hemisphere to problematize the dominance of American and European theorising on the position of women.⁶⁸ It was swiftly co-opted by those working in international development, but in ways that often emphasised local initiatives over the responsibilities of states and international bodies. As a result, in recent years, many feminist theorists in the fields of international studies and globalisation have called for tightly contextualised analyses of female agency to understand the possible strategies available to women. They observe that this necessitates a recognition that individual empowerment might involve embracing modes of thought and action (including participation in right-wing or masculinist movements, the strategic use of passivity or dissimulation and so on) which may depart dramatically from Western liberal notions of feminist agency.⁶⁹ Pursuing an agent-focused perspective through analysing female empowerment strategies could ensure that privileged discourses do not over-determine our interpretations. This might also enable us to identify more acutely points of contact for a shared politics. Utilising a pragmatic conceptual framework of this nature has the potential to ensure we do not inadvertently disguise the plurality of ways women have historically attempted to empower themselves; how and why

they sought to conceptualise and define their positions in opposition to other women; and the global impact of these, at times, competing models of empowerment at a critical moment of modernity. As discussions continue over the campaigns which led to the partial enfranchisement of women in Britain in 1918, there is an urgent need to situate British women's activism, vocabularies, and concepts within the wider global debates and actions of which they formed a part.

¹ The workshop was held at St Luke's Chapel, University of Oxford, in January 2017. The authors would like to thank TORCH (The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities) whose funding and support make the workshop possible. We are grateful to all those involved with the workshop, and give especial thanks to those who gave papers and acted as respondents.

² See for example the Vote 100 project: <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/vote-100/vote-100-project/vote-100-project-info/>; and the commission of a women's suffrage statue in Parliament Square: <https://www.london.gov.uk/decisions/dd2132-commission-suffrage-statue-parliament-square>.

In the 2017 budget the government announced £5 million towards events to commemorate the centenary. The National Trust is also planning a series of initiatives to celebrate the act as part of their 'Challenging Histories' series. Many local and national museums are planning either physical or online exhibitions to mark the centenary.

³ A wealth of rich scholarship includes Leila J. Rupp (1997) *Worlds of Women: the making of an international women's movement* (Princeton: Princeton University Press); Clare Midgley, Alison Twells, and Julie Carlier (Eds) (2016) *Women in Transnational History: connecting the local and the global* (Abingdon: Routledge); Barbara Bush and June Purvis (2016)

Connecting Women's Histories: the local and the global, *Women's History Review*, 25, pp.1–6; Ian Fletcher, Laura Mayhall, and Philippa Levine (Eds) (2000) *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire: citizenship, nation, and race* (London: Routledge); Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan (Eds) (1994) *Suffrage and Beyond: international feminist perspectives* (Auckland: Auckland University Press); and Marie Sandell (2015) *The Rise of Women's Transnational Activism: identity and sisterhood between the world wars* (London: I.B. Tauris).

⁴ The 'Translating Feminism' project is based at the University of Glasgow but has university partners in Switzerland, Indonesia, the UK, and the USA.

<http://www.gla.ac.uk/schools/humanities/research/historyresearch/researchprojects/translatingfeminism/>. See also Alys Eve Weinbaum, Lynn M. Thomas, Priti Ramamurthy, Uta G.

Poiger, Madeleine Yue Dong, and Tani E. Barlow (Eds) (2008) *The Modern Girl around the World: consumption, modernity, and globalisation* (Durham: Duke University Press).

⁵ See especially Fletcher, Mayhall, and Levine, *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire*.

⁶ Louise Edwards and Mina Roces (Eds) (2004) *Women's Suffrage in Asia: gender, nationalism and democracy* (London: Routledge Curzon), p. 1.

⁷ Mansour Bonakdarian (2000) British suffragists and Iranian women, 1906–1911, in Fletcher, Mayhall, and Levine, *Women's Suffrage*, p.163, pp. 165–167.

⁸ Laura Mayhall (2000) The South African War and the origins of suffrage militancy in Britain, 1899–1902, in Fletcher, Mayhall, and Levine, *Women's Suffrage*, pp. 3–17.

⁹ Nancy F. Cott (1989) Comment on Karen Offen's 'Defining Feminism: a comparative historical approach', *Signs*, 15, p. 205.

¹⁰ Fleischmann, *The Other 'Awakening'*, p. 173.

¹¹ Sylvia Paletschek and Bianka Pietrow-Ennker (2004) Introduction: concepts and issues, in Paletschek and Pietrow-Ennker, *Women's Emancipation Movements*, pp. 3–10.

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- ¹² Beth Baron (2005) *Egypt as a Woman* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 32.
- ¹³ Zillah Eisenstein (2004) *Against Empire: feminisms, racism and the West* (London: Zed).
- ¹⁴ Marilyn Booth (2015) Textured Feminisms: Cairo, Tokyo, Beijing, 1907, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 35, p. 177.
- ¹⁵ Karen Offen (2000) *European Feminisms, 1700–1950: a political history* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), p. 19.
- ¹⁶ Kumari Jayawardena (1986), *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed Books), p. 22.
- ¹⁷ Karen Offen, ‘Defining Feminism: a comparative historical approach’, *Signs*, 14:1 (1988), pp. 119–157; and Karen Offen, On the French Origin of the Words *Feminism* and *Feminist*, *Feminist Issues*, 8:1 (1988), pp. 45–51. The term *nan-nü* was important for capturing the sense of ‘gender relations’ and was coined by He-Yin Zhen: see Lydia He Liu, Rebecca E. Karl, and Dorothy Ko (Eds) (2013) Introduction: Toward a Transnational Feminist Theory, in *The Birth of Chinese Feminisms: essential texts in transnational theory* (New York: Columbia University Press), pp. 1–26. For the ‘new woman’, see Guity Nashat and Judith E. Tucker (1999) *Women in the Middle East and North Africa: restoring women to history* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), p. 83; and Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, p. 13.
- ¹⁸ *Fusen* had an identical pronunciation to *fusm* (‘universal suffrage’) and had been coined to protest at the exclusion of women from its remit. Yukiko Matsukawa and Kaoru Tachi (1994) Women’s Suffrage and Gender Politics in Japan, in Caroline Daley and Melanie Nolan (Eds), *Suffrage and Beyond: international feminist perspectives* (Auckland: Auckland University Press), p. 176.
- ¹⁹ Padma Anagol (2010), Feminist Inheritances and Foremothers: the beginnings of feminism in modern India, *Women’s History Review*, 19, p. 523–546, p. 524.

²⁰ Linda Edmondson (2001) Women's Rights, Gender and Citizenship in Tsarist Russia, 1860–1920: the question of difference, in Patricia Grimshaw, Katie Holmes, and Marilyn Lake (Eds) *Women's Rights and Human Rights: international historical perspectives* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave), pp. 153–167.

²¹ For an influential statement see Madhu Purnima Kishwar (1990) Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist, *Manushi*, 61, pp. 2–8. For discussion in relation to the historical context of the late nineteenth century see: Antoinette M. Burton (1994) *Burdens of History: the British feminists, Indian women, and imperial culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill; London: University of North Carolina Press); Clare Midgley (2007) *Feminism and Empire: women activists in Imperial Britain, 1790–1865* (London: Routledge); and Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Eds) (1992) *Western Women and Imperialism: complicity and resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press).

²² Sylvia Paletschek and Bianka Pietrow-Ennker (2004) Women's Emancipation Movements in Europe in the Long Nineteenth Century, in Sylvia Paletschek and Bianka Pietrow-Ennker (Eds) (2004) *Women's Emancipation Movements in the Nineteenth Century: a European perspective* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 301–333.

²³ Examples include Sharon Sievers (1989) Dialogue, *Journal of Women's History*, 1, pp. 134–46; Elena Borghi (2017) Forgotten Feminisms: gender and the Nehru household in early-twentieth-century India, *Gender & History*, 29, p. 268.

²⁴ Antoinette Burton (2006) History is Now: feminist theory and the production of historical feminisms, *Women's History Review*, 1, pp. 25–39.

²⁵ Iris Berger (1976) Rebels or Status Seekers? Women as spirit mediums in East Africa, in Nancy Hafkin and Edna Bay (Eds) *Women in Africa: Studies in Social and Economic Change* (Stanford: Stanford University Press), pp. 167–170; I. M. Lewis (1971) *Ecstatic Religion: an anthropological study of spirit possession and shamanism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin); Nancy

A. Hewitt (2010) Re-Rooting American Women's Activism: global perspectives on 1848, in Karen Offen (2010) *Globalizing Feminisms, 1789–1945* (London: Routledge), p. 24.

²⁶ For a recent overview see Carolette Norwood (2013) Perspective in Africana Feminism: exploring the expressions of black feminism / in the African Diaspora, *Sociology Compass*, 7, pp. 225–236.

²⁷ Binbin Yang (2012) Disruptive Voices, *Nan Nü*, 14, pp. 222–261.

²⁸ Joan Judge (2013) Chinese Women's History: global circuits, local meanings, *Journal of Women's History*, 25, pp. 223–228.

²⁹ Marilyn Booth (2015) *Classes of Ladies of Cloistered Spaces: writing feminist history through biography in fin de siècle Egypt* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press).

³⁰ Clare Midgley (2013) Liberal Religion and the 'Woman Question' between East and West: perspectives from a nineteenth-century Bengali women's journal, *Gender & History*, 25, pp. 445–460, p. 446; Ellen L. Fleischmann (2010) The Other 'Awakening': the emergence of women's movements in the modern Middle East, 1900–1940, in Offen, *Globalising Feminisms*, p. 176; Yang, Disruptive Voices, p. 228; Eleni Varikas (2004) National and Gender Identity in Turn-of-the-Century Greece, in Paletschek and Pietrow-Ennker, *Women's Emancipation Movements*, pp. 263–279; and Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, p. 22.

³¹ See for example Mia Bay, Farah J. Griffin, Martha S. Jones, and Barbara D. Savage (Eds) (2015) *Toward An Intellectual History of Black Women* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press).

³² Berger, *Rebels Or Status Seekers*; Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion*.

³³ Joanna de Groot (2010) Feminism in Another Language: learning from 'feminist' histories of Iran and/or histories of Iranian "feminism" since 1830, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 21, pp. 251–265, p. 258.

³⁴ For example, Patricia Grimshaw (2001) *Reading the Silences: suffrage activists and race in nineteenth-century settler societies*, in Grimshaw, Holmes, and Lake, *Women's Rights*, pp. 31–48, see especially p. 33; Edmondson, *Women's Rights, Gender and Citizenship*, p.156; Liu, Karl, and Ko (Eds) *The Birth of Chinese Feminisms*, pp. 36–39.

³⁵ Barbara Molony (2010) *Women's Rights, Feminism, and Suffragism in Japan, 1870–1925*, in Offen, *Globalising Feminisms*, p. 52.

³⁶ John Markoff (2003) *Margins, Centers, and Democracy: the paradigmatic history of women's suffrage*, *Signs*, 29, pp. 104–105.

³⁷ Patricia Grimshaw (2010) *Settler Anxieties, Indigenous Peoples, and Women's Suffrage in the Colonies of Australia, New Zealand, and Hawai'i, 1888–1902*, in Offen, *Globalising Feminisms*, pp. 111–121. The quote is at p. 115. See also Raewyn Dalziel, *An Experiment in the Social Laboratory? Suffrage, national identity, and mythologies of race in New Zealand in the 1890s*, in Fletcher, Mayhall, and Levine, *Women's Suffrage in the British Empire*, pp. 88–102.

³⁸ Markoff, *Margins, Centers, and Democracy*, p. 93, p. 96.

³⁹ Jad Adams (2014) *Women and the Vote: a world history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), p. 191, p. 132.

⁴⁰ Senia Paseta (2013) *Irish Nationalist Women* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press); Jad Adams, *Women and the Vote*, pp. 177–183; Fleischmann, *The Other 'Awakening'*.

⁴¹ Tcho Mbaimba Caulker (2009) *The African-British Long Eighteenth Century: an analysis of African-British treaties, colonial economics, and anthropological discourse* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books).

⁴² Hewitt, *Re-rooting American Women's Activism*, in Offen, *Globalising Feminisms*, p. 24.

⁴³ Grimshaw, *Settler Anxieties*, in Offen, *Globalising Feminisms*, p. 120.

⁴⁴ Imaobong Umoren's work focuses on the intersecting history of race, gender, migration, and religion in the nineteenth and twentieth-century Caribbean, United States, and global African diaspora. Her book *Race Women Internationalists: Black Activist-Intellectuals, Travel and Global Freedom Struggles* is forthcoming. Marilyn Booth is currently working on nineteenth-century feminism and women's writing in Egypt and Ottoman Syria, with focus on the emergence of the Arabic novel, female readership, translation, and discourses of publishing. Marilyn Booth (2015) *Classes of Ladies of Cloistered Spaces: writing feminist history through biography in fin-de-siècle Egypt* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press) and Booth (2001) *May Her Likes Be Multiplied: biography and gender politics in Egypt* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press).

⁴⁵ Karen Offen (2010) Introduction, in Offen, *Globalising Feminisms*, p. xxxiii.

⁴⁶ Kathy Glass (2006) *Courting Communities: black female nationalism and 'syncre-nationalism' in the nineteenth-century north* (New York; London: Routledge).

⁴⁷ Maria Stewart, 'Religion and the Pure Principles of Morality, the Sure Foundation on Which we must build', appeared as a pamphlet in 1891. The other texts Umoren referred to were: Sojourner Truth, 'When Woman Gets her Rights Man Will be Right' (1867); Anna Julia Cooper, 'The Status of Women in America' in *A Voice from the South* (1892); and Catherine McKenzie, 'Woman's Rights', *Jamaica Advocate*, 10 August 1901, p. 1 and p. 17.

⁴⁸ Booth, *Textured Feminisms*, p. 176. Similarly, Marilyn Booth has written of the significance of collective biography for the Lebanese-born Egyptian writer, Zaynab Fawwaz, who included entries on American suffrage campaigner Victoria Woodhull as well as Turkish activist Fatma Aliye Marilynn. Marilyn Booth (1995), Exemplary Lives, Feminist Aspirations: Zaynab Fawwaz and the Arabic biographical tradition, *Journal of Arabic Literature*, 26, pp. 120–146.

⁴⁹ Booth, *Textured Feminisms*, p. 178.

⁵⁰ Sumita Mukherjee has a book forthcoming with Oxford University Press titled *Indian Suffragettes: Female Identities and Transnational Networks*. See also Sumita Mukherjee (2017) The All-Asian Women's Conference 1931: Indian women and their leadership of a pan-Asian feminist organisation, *Women's History Review*, 26, pp. 363–381. Ruth Percy has a book forthcoming titled *'I Am Not a Feminist': equality, rights, and working women's culture in London and Chicago, 1870s–1920s*.

⁵¹ Anagol, *Feminist Inheritances and Foremothers*; Borghi, *Forgotten Feminisms*, p. 269, note 4.

⁵² Geraldine Forbes (1996) *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

⁵³ 'Indian Poetess in England', *Daily News and Leader*, 13 November 1913.

⁵⁴ Lucy Delap (2007) *The Feminist Avant-Garde: transatlantic encounters of the early twentieth century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

⁵⁵ Jayawardena, *Feminism and Nationalism*, p.14.

⁵⁶ David Featherstone (2012) *Solidarity: hidden histories and geographies of internationalism* (London; New York: Zed Books).

⁵⁷ Mukherjee, *Indian Suffragettes* (forthcoming 2018), ch. 2.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Mary Macarthur, 'Sex Unrest and the Middle Class' in 'Woman's Discontent—and Why', *The Daily Graphic*, 2 July 1914. Gertrude Tuckwell Collection, 604II/64. Trades Union Congress Library, London Metropolitan Library.

⁶⁰ Marilyn J. Boxer (2007) Rethinking the Socialist Construction and International Career of the Concept 'Bourgeois Feminism', *The American Historical Review*, 112, pp. 131–158, p.131.

⁶¹ *Westminster Journal*, 18 March 1916. Gertrude Tuckwell Collection, 324/8.

⁶² This included texts such as ‘Public Opinion—Women in Industry’, Margaret G. Bondfield, MP, *American Federationist* [American Federation of Labor’s journal], July 1927.

⁶³ Rebecca Beck August in Feminist Oral History Project, accessible via <http://symposia.library.csulb.edu/iii/cpro/CommunityViewPage.external;jsessionid=9FD39E2CBFF2D7C8CA207826743AA093?lang=eng&sp=1000026&suite=def>. Sara Fredgant in ‘The Twentieth-Century Trade Union Woman: vehicle for social change,’ oral history project, Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations, the University of Michigan—Wayne State University.

⁶⁴ June Hannam and Karen Hunt (2002) *Socialist Women: Britain, 1880s to 1920s* (London: Routledge), pp. 8–12.

⁶⁵ Joan W. Scott (1986) Gender: a useful category of historical analysis, *American Historical Review*, 91, pp. 1053–1075.

⁶⁶ Midgley, *Feminism and Empire*, pp.7–9; Offen (2000) *European Feminisms, 1700–1950*, Chapter One, pp. 19–26.

⁶⁷ de Groot, *Feminism in Another Language*, pp. 251–265.

⁶⁸ See for example, Gita Sen and Caren Grown (1987) *Development Crises and Alternative Visions: third world women’s perspectives* (New York: Monthly Review Press).

⁶⁹ For useful overviews of the debates: Carolyn M. Elliott (2008) Introduction: markets, communities, and empowerment, in Carolyn M. Elliott (Ed) *Global Empowerment of Women: responses to globalization and politicized religions* (Abingdon: Routledge), pp. 1–22, especially pp. 6–9; Jane L. Parpart, Shirin M. Rai and Kathleen Staudt (2002) Rethinking Em(power)ment, Gender and Development, in *idem*, *Rethinking Empowerment: gender and development in a global / local world* (London: Routledge), pp. 3–21.